She just woke up. Her palms are sweaty. She remembers her dream: There were tons of people surrounding her; claustrophobia hit hard. Even though she lives in the heart of New York City, she can’t stand crowds. There was an air of chaos surrounding her. People were yelling and she tightly squeezed her frail little hands against her ears, in an attempt to escape the world around her. It didn’t work. She was being tossed around by the crowds. At that moment, she woke up. She found herself looking straight into the eyes of her father, who had been trying to calm her down from her restless fit of sleep.

This was a nightly routine for Isabella Richardson. Ever since she was a young child, she was haunted in her sleep by her worst of fears-- loud crowds; people, for that matter. She was only comfortable in the company of loved ones. It was a struggle for her to live in NYC, but she had no choice. Since her mother left them when she was very young, Isabella and her father, Carlo, were forced to stay in the city so that they could make a living. The situation they were faced with made them struggle with the idea of “religion.” How could there be a God if so many things went wrong? It wasn’t the ideal situation, but they made it work for the first 14 years of Isabella’s life.

However, lately her father had been acting very strange, and seemed awfully sick. Carlo refused to visit the doctors, though, because he says that it would just be a waste of time and money. He said that he would just take it easy at work the next couple days, and everything would be okay. Isabella believed him, as she always had, so she didn’t think anything of it. Their days continued on just like normal. Carlo would leave for work at 6am and return at 6pm, every day, just in time to eat whatever they could find, and then eventually be ready for a night of wrestling with Isabella to get her to sleep. But one day, exactly a week after he had begun to show signs of illness, he never came home. Before she knew it, there was a knock on the door. It was her uncle, and he was there to take her to the hospital.

On the way there, Isabella’s uncle explain that, while he was carrying a rather heavy load of groceries to a customer’s car, he suddenly collapsed and was unconscious. Upon their arrival at the hospital, Isabella was thinking, “Who’s supposed to read to me every night and calm my ever-active imagination every time I have a nightmare?! He can’t leave me now. God, why are you doing this?”

The doctors told Isabella and her uncle that the reason Carlo fainted is from a combination of his constant worry for Isabella on top of his over-commitment in his job at the grocery store down the street. “The cause was definitely not a virus; not contagious by any means. But we still don’t have an absolute diagnosis. The problem here is that he’s neglected to get treated for so long that there is permanent damage to the brain, and things will only get worse from now on.” “Isn’t there something you can do about it?!” Isabella couldn’t even fathom life without her father by her side every night. “Unfortunately, no. It is too late for any cure to be given that would have even the slightest effect. Had he come to us earlier, there might have been more chance of survival or even complete recovery...I’d say he has, at most, one night to live.”

Isabella was so shaken up that she couldn’t move. She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t even look up at the hospital bed where her father was lying without losing control of her emotions. Isabella wanted to be strong for her dad, just as he had been for her every single night they were together at home. With this in mind, she gently curled up by him and talked with him about how they used to go on walks in the early morning (that way they didn’t have to deal with Isabella’s dreadful fear of crowds), and of the french toast they had together every Sunday for brunch, and of the nighttime stories he would read to her to calm her nerves before bed. As his time was growing slimmer, she asked her dad one last time for a bedtime story, and she was soon napping like a little angel. Soon after, he murmured his last words: “God, please protect my precious Isabella, and may she always have sweet, sweet dreams, and know that I love her, no matter what happens.” And with that, he passed.

His brother began sobbing uncontrollably. He looked over at Isabella, all cuddled up in her father’s arms. She was sleeping peacefully, for the first time in years. Her face had a strange sense of serenity across it; one that her uncle had never seen before. He was used to bursts of kicking and screaming, but not tonight. Maybe all they needed from the start was a little prayer and faith.